Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition: Hilary 2025

3rd Prize: David Vermeire (Singapore)

Is Free Will just an Illusion?

The question of whether free will exists or is merely an illusion has occupied philosophers for centuries. Thinkers like Augustine, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Sartre, and many more (Warburton, 2001 & 2011), have all wrestled with this problem, this is because the debate about free will raises deep questions about causation, personhood, rational agency, morality and accountability (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022). At stake is the idea of human responsibility; if all our actions are determined by prior causes, can we still be held liable? If, on the other hand, we do have genuine freedom, what kind of freedom is it, and how does it fit into a world governed by laws of nature? The concept of free will underpins our legal systems, social expectations, and even plays a role in theological arguments (Warburton, 2013). However, from the determinism of classical physics to discoveries in neuroscience, many now question whether there actually is such a thing as free will. This is precisely what this essay seeks to examine. Does free will truly exist, or is it an illusion? This analysis will be done in three parts: first, this essay will present arguments that support the view that free will is an illusion, drawing from determinism, neuroscience, and illusionist philosophy. Second are counterarguments defending free will, focusing on compatibilist and existentialist views. Finally, the conclusion brings these perspectives together to argue that while the traditional view of free will faces serious challenges, rejecting free will entirely is unnecessary. A more plausible view is that free will, understood in the compatibilist way, remains real and meaningful.

One of the most influential arguments against free will stems from the idea of determinism, the view that every event, including human actions, is the inevitable result of earlier causes (Blackburn, 2016). If all our choices are shaped by physical, genetic, or psychological conditions that lie beyond our control, then the idea that we could have done otherwise becomes difficult to defend. This has led many philosophers to question whether free will, as traditionally conceived, is even possible. Among them, Arthur Schopenhauer phrases it beautifully: "*A man can do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills*" (Schopenhauer, 1839). For deterministes, even when we believe we are acting freely, our desires and decisions are themselves shaped by causes beyond our control. Determinism is often associated with classical physics or Newtonian mechanics, which describe the universe as a system of fixed, predictable laws. Because of this, some have suggested that developments in quantum mechanics, which introduce randomness at the subatomic level, might leave room for free will. But while quantum events may not be fully predictable, randomness doesn't give us real control over our actions. As Pink (2004) and Blackburn (1999) argue, if our choices happen by chance, they aren't any more free than if they were fully determined. Real freedom, they reason, depends on being able to think, choose, and act in a way that reflects who we are.

Another argument against free will comes from neuroscience. In a famous set of experiments, Benjamin Libet found that unconscious brain activity begins several hundred milliseconds before a person becomes aware of deciding to act. He took this to mean that the brain has already made the decision before the person consciously realizes it (Libet, 1999). This suggests that our conscious mind is not really in control but only becomes aware of decisions after they've been made. However, Griffith (2021) notes that not everyone agrees with Libet's interpretation, some argue the brain activity he observed may reflect general readiness, not a final choice. Still, the

timing does raise an important concern: conscious decisions might come too late to be in control of our actions.

Some contemporary philosophers, influenced by findings in neuroscience and psychology, have also argued against free will. For example, Caruso (2012) argues that our sense of free will is not a sign of real control, but rather something that comes from how consciousness works. He sees it as a kind of mental illusion that happens because we are unaware of the unconscious processes that shape our actions. If that is true, then what feels like a free decision may just be a story we tell ourselves after the brain has already made the choice. Illusionist philosophers like Saul Smilansky say something similar, though they focus more on the practical side. He believes that even if free will in the traditional sense doesn't exist, we still need to believe in it to keep society and morality working (Smilansky, 2001). Without this belief, ideas like justice, punishment, or self-respect would become much harder to defend. In all these accounts, the role of the conscious self is smaller than we tend to think, and free will starts to look more like a helpful illusion than a real ability.

Let's now turn to theories defending free will. Despite the strength of the above arguments, many philosophers reject the idea that free will is entirely an illusion. Historically, thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Baruch Spinoza have defended versions of freedom that do not rely on the absence of causation. The existentialist Sartre believed that we are "condemned to be free" because we are always responsible for how we respond to our situation. Even when our choices are limited, we still shape who we become (Warburton, 2001). Spinoza, though a determinist, saw freedom as acting according to reason and understanding the causes that shape us. We are free not by escaping causes, but by recognizing and working with them (Warburton, 2011). These views shift the focus from metaphysical speculation to human agency and responsibility.

Some contemporary philosophers also defend the idea of free will, and one influential position is known as compatibilism. Compatibilism is the view that free will can exist even in a determined world. According to this view, we do not need to be uncaused or totally independent of outside influences to be free. What matters is that our actions come from our own desires, reasons, and values, not from external force or pressure. In this sense, freedom is about being able to act in a way that is consistent with who we are. Thomas Pink (2004) argues that this view of freedom reflects how we actually think about responsibility: we do not blame or praise people for being uncaused, but for acting in ways that show deliberation and intent. Blackburn (1999) makes a similar point, noting that our judgments focus on how people manage their impulses, whether they act in line with their character and values. In both cases, what matters is not whether someone's actions were ultimately caused, but whether they acted voluntarily and for reasons they endorsed. Meyer (2011) adds that if we abandon the idea of free will altogether, we risk losing the ability to make these kinds of moral distinctions, between someone who acts freely and someone who acts out of compulsion or pressure.

Finally, from a practical and scientific perspective, the belief in free will is difficult to dismiss. Even if freedom is shaped by causal conditions, the experience of reflecting and choosing remains central to how we live our lives. Velmans (2003) argues that even if conscious will does not directly cause our actions, it still plays an important psychological role. It supports a stable sense of self, helps us interact with others, and underpins our ideas of responsibility. Heisenberg (2009) adds a biological dimension to this view. He suggests that even in a determined system, the nervous system allows for flexible behavior. It adapts through feedback, memory, and interaction with the environment, making responses more than just mechanical. Velmans (2003) also argues that denying free will entirely overlooks the different levels at which human action can be understood. A brain scan might explain how neurons fire, but it cannot explain why a person acted, what they believed, intended, or valued. From a third-person perspective, we can describe behavior in physical terms, but from a first-person perspective, we understand it

through meaning and reasons. Both are valid, but only the second captures what it feels like to act freely. This layered view also shapes how we think about legal and moral responsibility. As Pink (2004) notes, in practice, we do not ask whether actions were uncaused, but whether they were informed, voluntary, and intentional. Compatibilist freedom is enough for this, it allows us to treat people as accountable without relying on the idea of total independence from causes.

After looking at the arguments on both sides, we can now revisit the central question: is free will an illusion? While determinism, neuroscience, and illusionism raise serious doubts about the traditional idea of free will, its complete denial goes too far. It risks eroding our understanding of moral responsibility and our ability to distinguish between choices we make freely and those made unwillingly. Compatibilist and psychological approaches offer a more grounded view. They show that even in a causally ordered world, we can still reflect, deliberate, and act in ways that are meaningfully our own. Free will, then, is not about escaping causality, but about living thoughtfully and responsibly within it, remaining something real and vital in how we think, choose, and act with purpose.

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